

## PRELIMINARY DRAFT

### CIVICS EDUCATION: A POSITION PAPER BY THE PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT

The long-run goal of The Patriotic Movement is to build up the national community and its institutions to correct for extreme polarization and divisiveness. To advance this goal, the movement supports four major missions: a year of national service for all Americans, teaching civics in all public and private schools, finding volunteers to teach new immigrants English, and conducting local and national moral dialogues on defining the common good and ways to advance it. The Patriotic Movement seeks to serve these goals by promoting and working with other organizations that are dedicated to these missions, rather than implementing them by itself. For more information about The Patriotic Movement, see its [website](#).

#### I. DECLINE AND FALL OF CIVICS EDUCATION

- From 1998 to 2014, eighth-graders' overall scores in civics improved, but still only 23% were at or above the proficient level. The level of proficiency is even lower for students who are Black or Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> Civics education is provided at lower rates and lower quality to students in low-resourced schools.<sup>2</sup>
- The number of civics courses students take has fallen since the middle of the last century, when high school students generally had three civics courses. Currently, schools around the country are "delivering one single-semester course to approximately 85 percent of students."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Are the nation's eighth-graders making progress in Civics?," The Nation's Report Card, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2015, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/main2014/pdf/2015112c.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Allen, "Here's one more question parents should think about during back-to-school season," The Washington Post, September 5, 2019, accessed September 10, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-need-civics-education-in-schools-to-build-effective-democratic-citizens/2019/09/05/3280dea4-cfe6-11e9-b29b-a528dc82154a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-need-civics-education-in-schools-to-build-effective-democratic-citizens/2019/09/05/3280dea4-cfe6-11e9-b29b-a528dc82154a_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

- From 1990 to 2010, there was an uptick in high school civics credits earned by students. The number of hours per week of civics instruction for students in grades 1 through 4 was relatively stable from 1990 to 2000, then fell sharply. As of 2010, it has been rising, but it has not returned to its previous level.<sup>4</sup>

## II. EFFECTS

- Scholars find that the reduction in civics education in our schools has had a negative impact on civic and political life. For example, Danielle Allen, James Bryant Conant University Professor and Director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, notes that Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk found “[o]nly about 30 percent of U.S. millennials consider it ‘essential’ to live in a democracy, while 72 percent of Americans born before World War II do.”<sup>5</sup>
- Believing in the necessity of living in a democracy is only the first step – for a democracy to survive citizens must know how to nurture and change it. Civics education is crucial to obtaining these skills.<sup>6</sup>
- The potential benefits of civics education are captured well by Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg:

In a society characterized by weak civic institutions, balkanized public discourse, and profoundly unequal civic engagement, schools can offer all young people opportunities to learn fundamental facts and skills, engage with each other and with their communities, and develop dispositions and values supportive of a republican form of government.

Civic learning, when done properly, is the best vehicle to train young people to sustain our democracy. Evidence shows that it raises young people’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions and puts them on trajectories to be active citizens as adults. Over time, investing in civic learning can ensure we train the future generations of citizens to safeguard our democracy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution” (Medford, MA: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, 2017), 10, <https://www.civxnow.org/static/media/SummitWhitePaper.fc2a3bb5.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, “Here’s one more question parents should think about during back-to-school season.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution” (Medford, MA: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, 2017), 3, <https://www.civxnow.org/static/media/SummitWhitePaper.fc2a3bb5.pdf>.

### III. REASONS FOR THE DECLINE & FALL

- After No Child Left Behind became the law of the land, in 2002, about a third of the school districts in the country shifted classroom time to math and English and away from social studies, which include civics. “Statewide skills tests that focus on math and English language arts, important as those subjects are, give schools no incentive to invest in civics instruction.”<sup>8</sup>
- Civics education can include controversial and/or political topics, and educators (from teachers in the classroom all the way up to school boards) have shied away from the topic to avoid raising parental ire or even inspiring litigation.<sup>9</sup>

### IV. NEEDED: CONSENSUS ABOUT WHAT CONSTITUTES CIVICS EDUCATION

- A main debate in the field is between those who favor a curriculum emphasizing civic knowledge and those who concentrate on “lived” or action civics.<sup>10</sup> Lived or action civics is “when students are encouraged to develop identities as citizens (with rights and responsibilities) and when they are encouraged to consider influencing institutional policies along with other options for addressing problems.”<sup>11</sup>
- One definition of civics “refers to instruction that integrates many subjects — social studies, history, government, language arts and media literacy — to help young people grow into self-aware, well-informed, equitable and effective democratic citizens.”<sup>12</sup>
- Another issue is differences of opinion with regard to the specific topics that should be discussed and the way they should be framed. As William A. Galston explains:

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<sup>8</sup> Allen, “Here’s one more question parents should think about during back-to-school season.”

<sup>9</sup> William A. Galston, “Civic Education and Political Participation,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37, no. 2 (April 2004): 264, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4488817.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> CivXNow, “CivXNow Member Spotlight: Danielle Allen,” Medium, July 29, 2019, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://medium.com/civxnow/civxnow-coalition-member-spotlight-danielle-allen-95dc18c59216>.

<sup>11</sup> Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution,” 5.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, “Here’s one more question parents should think about during back-to-school season.”

Some stress loyalty to current institutions and practices, while others emphasize critical reflection on them. Some focus on principles of national unity, while others want civic education to underscore the importance of demographical and ideological diversity. Some would teach our civic history as the story of fitful but palpable progress towards equality and inclusion, while others would insist on equal time for the effects of past and present oppression. Moral decency, voluntary service, voting, social movements ... each of these can be taken as the paradigm of civic practice and placed at the core of civic pedagogy.<sup>13</sup>

## V. SUGGESTIONS TO REMEDY THE SITUATION

- A handful of states – including Arizona, Florida, Illinois, and Massachusetts – have enacted new laws or created new educational standards related to civics instruction in schools.<sup>14</sup> The Massachusetts law, signed in November 2018, followed curriculum revisions made by the commonwealth’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in June of 2018. The law mandates that every student in the commonwealth’s public high schools and school districts that include eighth grade have access to at least one student-led, non-partisan civics project. [...] These projects can be individual, small group, or class wide and they must be designed to promote student abilities related to the analysis of complex issues; consideration of different perspectives; logical reasoning with supportive evidence; engagement in civil discourse, and understanding of the connections between federal, state, and local policies, including those that may impact the student’s school or community.<sup>15</sup>

The new law also includes the formation of the Civics Project Trust Fund and the creation of a nonpartisan voter initiative to encourage eligible high-school students to pre-register and register to vote.<sup>16</sup>

- Experts are currently collaborating on a knowledge- and action-based civics curriculum that will “teach traditional civics content through agency-centered pedagogies using a lot of case studies and simulations.” The curriculum also “scaffolds from acquiring core knowledge to the development of agency and culminates in an action project at the end of the year.” By incorporating both strategies,

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<sup>13</sup> Galston, “Civic Education and Political Participation,” 265.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, “Here’s one more question parents should think about during back-to-school season.”

<sup>15</sup> Office of Governor Charlie Baker and Lt. Governor Karyn Polito, Executive Office of Education, Governor’s Press Office, “Governor Baker Signs Bill to Promote Civic Education for Students,” news release, November 8, 2018, <https://www.mass.gov/news/governor-baker-signs-bill-to-promote-civic-education-for-students>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

this curriculum sidesteps the debate in the field between knowledge- and action-based civics, insuring that students gain both knowledge and experience in civics.<sup>17</sup>

- To promote high-quality civics education, new policies on the topic should explicitly address quality; include professional development for teachers; and employ data to allow policymakers, administrators, and teachers to learn and continue to develop the curricula based on evidence.<sup>18</sup>
- Civics must adapt to utilize innovative learning technologies, promote equity, and keep up with societal changes, especially technological and demographic shifts.<sup>19</sup> For example, due to the dominance of the internet and social media in contemporary discourse, students need media literacy training that will help them to identify trustworthy news sources and teach them to consider the source of anything they read online.
- Civics education curricula should be based on empirical research and developed through the collaborative efforts of researchers and educators. Relevant research includes studies that focus on civics instruction and research from related disciplines, such as media/communications, political science, and history.<sup>20</sup>
- Another important area of research to consider is determining the best practices for assessing knowledge retention in civics. This is crucial to keeping track of progress at all levels, from helping teachers assess student learning in their K-12 classrooms to studying the effects of civics instruction on students across the nation.<sup>21</sup>
- Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg describe “six proven practices” in civics education. The first “proven practice” is to make sure that students take classes that focus on civics and associated topics, while the others are: “[d]eliberations of current, controversial issues”; “[s]ervice-learning” (which is an

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<sup>17</sup> CivXNow, “CivXNow Member Spotlight: Danielle Allen.”

<sup>18</sup> Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution,” 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> CivXNow, “CivXNow Member Spotlight: Danielle Allen.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

educational framework in which students do community service and engage in coursework that connects to their activities); “[s]tudent-run voluntary associations”; “[s]tudent voice in schools”; and “[s]imulations of adult civic roles,” such as mock elections and model trials. Additionally, they recommend “[n]ews media literacy education,” “Action Civics,” “Social & Emotional Learning (SEL),” and “[s]chool climate reform.” Levine and Kawashima-Ginsburg also identify six “necessary conditions” that help advance the practices they favor: curriculum time devoted to civics; teachers and adults viewing civics education as a key responsibility; emphasis on civics learning, engagement, and accountability for outcomes; curricular and professional support for teachers on civics topics; student excitement and motivation; and equity.<sup>22</sup>

- Parental advocacy is needed to bring about increased attention to the kind of programs civics education requires,<sup>23</sup> especially in the current age, as democratic governments are under assault in many parts of the world.

#### VI. MAJOR PLAYERS (ASSOCIATIONS FOR CIVICS EDUCATION/TEACHERS, ETC.)

In alphabetical order:

- Association of Teachers of Social Studies/United Federation of Teachers
- Center for Civic Education
- CIRCLE (the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) – at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life – Tufts
- CivXNow
- Close Up
- Constitutional Rights Foundation
- Generation Citizen

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<sup>22</sup> Levine and Kawashima-Ginsburg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution,” 4-6.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, “Here’s one more question parents should think about during back-to-school season.”

- iCivics
- Lou Frey Institute – at the University of Central Florida
- National Constitution Center
- National Council for the Social Studies
- NewseumED
- Project Citizen
- Rock the Vote (Democracy Class initiative)
- Teachingcivics.org
- The Choices Program – affiliated with Brown University's Department of History